

Fire on the High Seas

a *Firefly* fanfic

by *Rodo*

for *Musyc*

“IF YOU DON’T mind my saying, sir, this is a gorrám mess.”

Private Park was lucky that they’d known each other for nearly half a decade at this point. Lieutenant Adeoye of the Greenleaf Alliance Navy detachment wasn’t usually one to tolerate comments like these from a subordinate. Still, Park wasn’t wrong: it was a gorrám mess. And worse still, it was *his* gorrám mess to sort out. A devastating fire, one passenger unaccounted for, and countless people to process. Adeoye sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming. Then he got to it.



The infirmary looked much like any navy infirmary Adeoye had seen before – white walls and sterile blue floor tiles. The patient was awake and looked to be a good deal healthier than Adeoye felt, but the doctors had assured him that the head trauma – though unlikely to lead to any long-term damage – was real, and likely to have interfered with short term memory retention. Unfortunately, this man was his only tangible witness. What had happened to him was the only thing that proved that there was something more going on than what had appeared to at first, when the *Majestic Queen* had limped into port half charred. Marcus O’Keefe didn’t look like a security officer, especially out of uniform. He looked like an underwear model with his bronze skin, dark locks, and soulful eyes. But maybe that was why he had been hired, more than his other qualifications.

“So, what do you remember?”

O’Keefe shrugged. “Nothing, really. One moment I was standing there, doing my job, the next Toni was slapping me awake and all hell had broken loose. That’s about it.”

Which was precisely nothing. Adeoye needed more than a guard getting knocked unconscious. It could have been a beam falling in the chaos, for all he knew.

“Why were you on the lower decks anyway? Everybody else was upstairs.”

For a moment, O’Keefe seemed to browse his mind for an answer. “Dehlavi, that was his name. One of the passengers. He was worried someone might try to steal something of his. Said there’s been a guy who was after it. To be honest, I didn’t really pay that much attention. A passenger asks me to guard their cabin, I don’t ask too many questions. I just do what I’m told.”

“Does the name Lofton ring any bell?”

“No, should it?”

Maybe. It would have been convenient, in any case. The reclusive young man was the only one missing, as per the passenger manifest. But that was as much as he was going to get out of O’Keefe, so Adeoye had no choice but to go back to the command center and hope that Park had had more luck.



“Huh,” Malcolm Reynolds mumbled, staring straight ahead, looking a little dumbfounded with his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. Zoë didn’t hold it against him. She was very tempted to gape as well; the building in front of them looked... like it should belong to someone who’d spent most of his life on one of the Core worlds and who had decided to bring that life with him to the Border. The sloped roofs of the residence – the word “house” didn’t do it justice – resembled a pagoda with its expertly crafted tiles, and the electric sliding doors looked speckless, as if they repelled dust and dirt all on their own. There were gormam *statues* sitting on a lawn that had a better manicure than Inara.

“Well, sir, I guess someone had to fall on their feet after the war,” she mumbled. Still...

“Makes you wonder, though, don’t it?”

It did. Zoë just wasn’t sure that she wanted to go there. “We need the credits,” she reminded him. “And we could do a lot worse for a client.”

“Oh, I’m not saying we don’t take the job. I’m just saying... makes you wonder.”

Zoë raised an eyebrow at her captain but left it at that, wondering if this would lead to trouble later on. Not that she wouldn’t be on the captain’s side, mind you. She just wanted one job that went off as planned.

They all did.

There was a butler or manservant or factotum or personal assistant – something in that general direction – who led them into the “grand study,” a room that deserved its name, because it was a lot larger than it needed to be, filled to the brim with books that she

doubted the owner had ever had the time or inclination to read. From what she remembered of Anton Umarov, he'd never been too interested in intellectual pursuits. He was a lover of money, food, sex and alcohol, in that order – or at least he used to be.

“Malcolm Reynolds!” The booming voice echoed through the halls, calling attention to the man who waltzed into the grand study. He certainly looked like a man who enjoyed all four things, Zoë thought. Anton had not only gained money in the last seven years; he'd also gained quite a bit around his middle. Life must be comfortable. However, the glint in his eyes was a very familiar one. He'd always had that presence that made him the center of a group when they were all off duty, even more so than Mal.

“Anton,” the captain replied, holding out his hand and letting himself be shaken along with it. “It’s good to see you again, *zhànyǒu*.”¹

“Gotta say, captain, I was a bit surprised to hear you was still kicking around. Specially when I heard about your trade. But then I thought, if anyone can make it work, it’s the captain. You were always one scary sumbitch. Haven’t changed mite.”

“Not sure we can say the same about you,” Zoë murmured.

Their host turned his sharp eyes to her as if he was noticing her for the first time. It would feel uncomfortable, if she hadn’t faced much worse in her time. “Corporal. Still following this one, I see.”

Mal clapped their old comrade on the back, like he would have back at Du-Khang. “Much as I’d like to reminisce with you about the bad old times, Anton, time is money. A lot of it, unfortunately. Greenleaf ain’t exactly the friendliest port, if you catch my meaning. And the docking fees are eating a hole into my purse by the minute.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Anton agreed with a nod. Still, instead of getting on with it, he moved behind his desk and poured them both a finger of something fancy before holding up his own glass. “A toast to those who didn’t make it here.”

To that, at least, Zoë could drink. The amber liquid burned worse than some of the backwater moonshine she’d had during the war.

“Now, old friends, I got a job that needs doing. You’ll get a decent pay out of it, if you’re in. But I won’t lie to you, Mal. I went to your sort of man for a reason. It’s no work for green boys.”

“That’s not gonna be a problem,” Mal said, “but I do gotta ask: is this about drops? Because if it is, we’re out.”

¹ *zhànyǒu*: comrade, brother-in-arms

It was a fair question, and one that they'd all discussed in the mess before risking going dirtside on a planet like Greenleaf, where the authorities hunted smugglers with a zeal not even the Core planets could match. Everything went back to drugs sooner or later on Greenleaf, whether illegal or legal.

Anton simply waved his hand as if he was shooing away the very notion. "No. I remember how up your own ass you used to be about that, captain. Would be a bad businessman if that's what I was hiring you for, 'cause it'd be a recipe for trouble. I might facilitate connections between certain individuals involved in the trade from time to time, but my business is above board, I assure you. This is a—" he coughed and cast his eyes to the side like an actor in a bit play on Beaumonde —*personal* request. Tell me, Mal, what do you know about cruises?"

"About what now?"



"How many people?" Adeoye asked, referring to the staff and passengers that were currently processed in the holding area. He'd only walked past it, but the whole thing had been pure chaos: rich patrons, exhausted staff, even the odd companion. There was more gossip than was good for anyone, no doubt, and then there was the state of the ship itself...

"We've weeded out most already," Park replied. "Most people's whereabouts at the time of the incidents are accounted for – they were at the party." He was efficient, which was why he could get away with comments that were a little out of line. Also, his uniform was *always* in order. "In addition to that, most of the passengers have participated in one of these voyages before, so we deprioritized them, decided to focus on the unknown faces – the new staff especially."

Adeoye nodded. He would have done the same. "Still, keep an eye on the rest as well. Everyone is grounded for the foreseeable future, even if they don't like it." Which they wouldn't at all, but dealing with complaints was far below his pay grade and thus no longer his problem.

"Sir." One of the privates working in communications peeked into the room, and Adeoye was ready to reprimand her for the disruption after he'd asked not to be disturbed during the briefing, until he noticed the haunted look on the young woman's face. "It's the admiral. He wants to speak to you, immediately."

"Did he say why?"

The private's eyes skittered about restlessly. "It's about his wife, sir. Apparently she's on the ship."

Which was enough to keep Adeoye busy for the rest of the afternoon. It seemed complaints were not below his pay grade, after all. He was lucky in that his team was a well-oiled machine of competent soldiers who didn't need him to oversee their every step. When he finally got off comms after assuring the admiral and his wife that he'd do his very best to solve the case to everyone's satisfaction in no time at all – certainly by the time she was planning to leave for her niece's wedding on Osiris the next day – Park was serving him the first suspects to interrogate on a silver platter.

"They're both new – he started in the kitchen, she as a server. None of the others could account for their whereabouts when the fire started, but they were near Sunshine Deck shortly after the alarm went off."

Adeoye stared through the one way mirror into the two adjacent cells. One contained a large, muscular white man close to middle age who looked like he would be more at home in a backwater tavern brawl than a kitchen. The other, a stone-faced young black woman who stared back at him through the glass, calm as anything. Those two were suspicious, alright. It was just a question of proving it.

"You find anything on them?"

"No."

"And what did the rest of the staff say?"

"She did a good enough job, but was a bit standoffish. She's the one who saved the security guard, by the way. As for him, well, the cook appreciated his help with the heavy pots, but he was moaning a lot. Whined about feeling sick and blamed it on the food."

"They spend any time together during the voyage?"

"No more than any of the others."

"So this is just a hunch?"

"In essence. But it's the best we've got so far. Dehlavi's wanting to talk to you as well."

That would have to be enough. Adeoye collected himself, took a deep breath and looked back and forth once, twice, thrice to decide which nut to crack first.

He went with the large guy. Those often looked tougher than they actually were.



"State your name, for the record." Adeoye hadn't bothered with a greeting. Scum from the Rim never appreciated it when you proved you had manners. Best case, they just spat in

your face. Worst case, they'd think it a sign of weakness. Adeoye had learned as much on his first tour after the war. As for this man, he practically oozed Rim scum from every pore.

The man on the other side of the table stared at him. "Got nothing on me. Ain't done nothing."

"We do have your name, at least," Adeoye explained patiently while he took a seat opposite the bear of a man. "But for the record, we need you to provide it in your own voice."

The man harrumphed and crossed his arms, as if the gesture was at all intimidating to a veteran of the Unification War. Adeoye watched his face carefully, taking in every twitch and frown. He was worried, but any back-berth would be, innocent or not. They always were when confronted with the authorities.

"John Coltrane," he finally growled. Had there been a slight hitch after the O, or had Adeoye imagined it?

"Well then, Mr. Coltrane. What can you tell me about what happened on the ship?"

A shrug shuddered through the massive shoulders.

"In your words, please."

"*Bù zhīdào.*"²

For a moment – a very long one – Adeoye leaned back and let Coltrane sweat with insecurity. He would be wondering what Adeoye knew, and what was just a bluff. Almost all of it was, of course, but that was what bluffing was for. In the end, Coltrane turned his head to stare at the corner left of Adeoye.

"What were you doing in the passenger quarters?"

The man stiffened, ever so slightly. "Nothing."

With a theatrical sigh, Adeoye leaned forward. "Listen, Coltrane, we can do this all day. But you and I both have better things to do. So why don't you make it easy on yourself and start talking?"

The man pressed his lips to a tight line and kept staring at the wall behind him. Adeoye was about to leave and let him stew a little more, sure he wouldn't speak, but then that reticent mouth opened, and the most unexpected words came out of it.

"I was sick."

"Pardon?"

The man *blushed* and somehow tensed even more.

"I was seasick. Happens to some people on the water, apparently. Didn't know, or I woulda never taken the job."

² *bù zhīdào*: Don't know.

The admission escaped from his tense jaw like a low hiss from a pressurized chamber during decompression. Adeoye had no doubt this part, at least, was the truth. Coltrane was embarrassed – and very much not an actor. Big tough men like him didn’t get seasick. And there was Adeoye’s way in. Once suspects got talking, they didn’t stop.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?”



“So, let me get this straight: there’s rich people who spend a fortune so that they can travel on a boat – like, an actual, honest to God, floats on water boat – to nowhere for two weeks? And they think that’s *fun*? Man, rich people are weird.”

Zoë tried to not smile adoringly at her husband, who put into words what they were all feeling. It was ridiculous, really. But it was a job, and one that would pay well, if they managed to pull it off. Stealing from rich people usually did.

Mal shrugged, sitting at the head of the dining room table during their informal planning session. He might have told Anton that they’d do it, that the plan was solid, but that didn’t mean the crew didn’t need to get any say.

“I suppose it’s a cultural difference. It’s quite common on Osiris,” Simon pointed out, in his loftiest, most Core tone of voice, sitting straight and being all prim and proper, like what Zoë imagined debutantes acted like. They all stared at him with various degrees of disbelief.

“Like I said: weird,” Wash concluded.

“You telling me you like cruises, doc?” Jayne scoffed.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t,” Simon replied. “I get seasick.”

Beside him, River was giggling and staring off into the distance, probably reliving some memory of better days. Jayne, meanwhile, was scoffing about the weak *shǎ guā*³ and his delicate sensibilities, but without any venom to his words.

“Well, in that case, you’ll be happy to hear that you and your sister are staying on the ship. Security’s far too tight to smuggle you two through the boarding procedures, and we need to keep under the radar for a fortnight.” Mal gave River a pointed look. “Which leaves—”

Just four of them. Wash was the pilot, the Shepherd wouldn’t do, and Inara had taken this rare visit on Greenleaf to expand her client base. Zoë looked around the table. Kaylee seemed simultaneously excited and scared, Jayne as disinterested as he was in a visit to the local library, and even Mal seemed like he’d rather be anywhere else.

³ *shǎ guā*: fool, lit. stupid melon

“Jayne, Zoë and me. Kaylee’ll stay on Serenity as backup – you’ll have to pick us up with the haul on Farwind Bay.” Mal pointed at the map he’d spread on the table. “We’ll have to time this carefully. Might sound like a simple smash and grab, but from what Anton told us, security will be tight. Lots of fancy folk on these voyages. If the feds pick us up, ain’t nothing nobody can do to get us out of it ’cept the Shepherd’s God.”



The beginning? Jay— John Coltrane grunted as he started to relay his side of the story to a very attentive lieutenant who had failed to introduce himself. He had to concentrate to keep a hold on his name and John Coltrane’s truth and all, with that stare. *It all started when I got on that gorram boat.*

At first, everything was normal. The *Majestic Queen* was still berthed, and Coltrane helped load the fuckton of fresh groceries rich people ate all day long. He’d been very tempted to steal an apple or two for himself, and maybe he’d been more than tempted. Nobody had missed them, and the cooks threw away anything that didn’t look rich-people-worthy anyway – served them to the staff. *You can lock me up for that, if you want. But the others was doing it too. Seen the soosheff pocket a peach when they thought no one was looking.*

“Maybe you should have reported it,” the lieutenant suggested, seeming almost bored.

Ain’t no snitch.

Eventually the ship left the harbor, and everything was just shiny. Then, John started thinking that maybe he shouldn’t have pocketed the apples after all. Maybe there’d been something wrong with them, since he started feeling a mite queasy. He spent an hour bowled over the shitter, puking his guts out. The trip was off to a good start.

“Everything alright in there?” a worried voice asked after what felt like ages, accompanied by a knock. When John opened the door, he saw one of the other new ones, a woman wearing a server’s uniform. Toni Jenkins. She was frowning at him. *Must have been looking a mess.*

“Alright,” he grunted back.

She wasn’t buying it. “You sure about that? Been in there for ages.”

“Yeah. Just ate something wrong-like.”

She still wasn’t buying it, but she left him alone, to serve the passengers their finely sliced apple tartlets, or whatever. John didn’t see her again until that evening, when they both were off shift on the servant deck, where seeing them wouldn’t disturb the Misses

and Mistery up top. By then, John had grown to thoroughly hate the bones of the *yī dà tuó dà biàn*⁴ he was standing on. Why wouldn't it ever stop moving? He'd thought the fresh air might help, but no, he was just heaving over the railing – which at least didn't stink as much as the shitter.

“Think you might be seasick.” It was that woman again. Toni. “I hear some people just can't stand the waves.”

“Not. Gorram. Seasick.”

“Suit yourself. But you better do your job when you have to,” she pointed out, before leaving him to his misery.

Did I talk any more to the woman? Yeah, occasionally. Not more than I had to. She isn't good company, that one. If you know what I mean.

“I don't,” the bugger joked.

Yeah well, can't help you there. Anyway...

And so the days went, until it was time for the big shindig. John spent his time working a *gǒu shì*⁵ job for a cook who mistook himself for a tyrant, and the rest of the time he was puking – and not even the not-so-bad kind of puking that came with getting kicked in the head too many times in a brawl. He'd never get on a boat again after this, not even if the money was better than great. Not worth the fucking trouble.

Yeah, that was an A-grade mess, from what I hear. Must have gotten away with a lot of scratch or you wouldn't be talking to me. But I don't know nothing 'bout that. I was busy. With what? Take a wild guess ... who? Never heard of a guy called Lofton.

It would all be over soon. Or so John told himself when it was time for the big shindig – a last, large fiesta on the upper deck for all the passengers before they disembarked. He imagined a boozy affair with lots of rowdy rich folk falling over their own feet and having to be picked up by the staff. He half regretted working on the lower decks – great opportunity for people to lose some of their valuables – without any opportunity for him to pick any of it up. But all in all, his spirits were up. Soon, he'd get his feet on dry land and never again leave. He was even getting used to the swaying some.

Except the wind picked up just when it was time for the party.

“What the gorram hell are you doin', boy,” the cook barked when he started to heave, right there with his valuable horr-something. “If you can't keep it down, get lost, and don't you dare show your face until you can, or your pay'll get docked even more.”

⁴ *yī dà tuó dà biàn*: a big pile of shit

⁵ *gǒu shì*: (dog) shit

John wanted to whack the fella, but another wave made it clear that he had a point. He high-tailed it out of there, thought about going to his bunk, then thought better of it. The servants' deck it was. At least there, he wouldn't puke all over things he'd rather keep clean.

Except I couldn't go there either. Some fellas was necking in the corner, and that made me wanna puke even more. They was almost up to ruttin' right then and there.

And so, he had a choice. Slink back to his bunk or find a better place to hate the sea. Since the trip was almost over, he decided to risk it – maybe it was better higher up. That idea came to his mind quite suddenly. So far, he'd barely made it past the waterline. Maybe, the key to enjoying the sea was being high up – the richies didn't seem to have any problems, after all.

John found his way up quite easily at first, but then things got a bit confusing. There were a lot of stairs, and a lot of corridors, and his stomach wouldn't settle after all. In the end, somewhere on the seventh deck, he decided to sit down in the stairwell and catch his breath. He could hear the music there. Not as rowdy as he had imagined. He wondered how anyone had fun like that. There weren't even any nice food smells, like in the galleys. In fact, it smelled rather burned...

And then I saw the fire. Ran down as fast as I could. Was almost back at my cabin to pick up my stuff when the alarm went off... yeah, maybe I shoulda pulled it, but you know how it is. A fella thinks about himself when there's a fire, and I had worked damned hard – didn't want to lose what little I had just to save some rich people's asses.



“Why do you get to be the passenger?” Jayne complained as they waited in a side-street near the spaceport for the show to start. “I want to be the rich guy for once and get waited on.”

Zoë cast a doubtful gaze his way. And another at Mal, who was fidgeting with the fine maroon coat Anton had arranged for him, alongside a second class ticket, a fake name and papers. He looked the part of a Core tourist. Simon had fiddled with his hair until it was as slicked back and smooth as his own, and the clothes did the rest. Until Mal decided to open his mouth, of course. Or until his temper got the better of him. Whichever came first. If everything went according to plan, he'd spend most of his time in his cabin and nobody would take a closer look. Everything would go smooth-like.

“Think you can pull off this look?” Mal asked him.

Jayne scoffed, but even he knew that the chances of that were slim. He hated the fancy ruffles even more than Mal.

“Maybe I should do it,” Zoë joked. They all laughed. It wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, or that they thought she couldn’t. It just wasn’t *her*. She was perfectly happy playing a servant and going unnoticed until the job was done. She was good at that.

“You all got the mark’s face memorized?” Mal asked.

They all nodded. The first challenge was going to find out where he was staying. It would be mostly down to Zoë, with Mal helping out if she couldn’t cut it. She’d be the one who would have an excuse to go wherever she wanted. It shouldn’t be that hard. How large could a ship be?

“Then all we got to do is find out where he hides the vase.”

A vase. It was ridiculous. Zoë thought so, Mal thought so, Jayne especially thought so. But to Anton, it wasn’t just a vase. It was a priceless Ming vase from Earth-That-Was, but more than that, it was the first item of importance and status that he’d bought once he’d made it, to prove to himself and the rest of the verse that he had. To him, it was the most precious possession he owned. Which was why Basan had decided to abscond with it after the breakup, which according to Anton’s abbreviated account must have been spectacular to witness. It was also why Anton was willing to part with a lot of credits to get it back – getting back at his ex was a bonus.

“Can’t be that hard,” Jayne said.

“He’s probably got it displayed somewhere,” Mal agreed. “If he’s even traveling with it, he must love looking at it. Probably has it on a shelf, or in one of those glass cases.”

Zoë nodded along. It didn’t sound too difficult, apart from getting off the boat (which was Wash’s job) and covering their tracks good. That was, until she said goodbye to Mal and wished him luck before following Jayne on her way to her new job. The *Majestic Queen* was looming above the shacks surrounding the harbor when she was blocks away yet, and she only grew larger the closer she got. Gorram, maybe it wouldn’t be as easy as all that. It could take weeks to properly comb their way through that haystack.



“You wanted to talk to me, Mr Dehlavi?” Adeoye asked.

The man jumped to his feet in the waiting area like an eager and particularly disheveled puppy. He was covered in soot, but underneath, Adeoye could see the traces of a very attractive man who knew how to hold himself. It was the last two days that had done a

number on him; his cabin had burned out at the center of the fire, and he was clearly at the end of his rope.

“Yes, yes! I have to tell you—”

“Not here,” Adeoye told him. They were in the waiting area and a number of curious ears had already started to perk up. Instead, Adeoye took him to an interrogation room.

“Just a formality,” he assured the man. “We don’t have any other rooms that could afford us any privacy.”

That seemed to put Dehlavi at ease. Was it his imagination, or could he really smell some of the remains of the fire on him? He clearly hadn’t had time to clean himself up even a little bit.

“It’s about my vase,” Dehlavi said. “A Ming vase from Earth-That-Was, very precious. I had it in my cabin, but I’ve seen the remains of it, once the fire was put out, and it was gone. Not a single shard left. Someone must have taken it!”

Artifacts from Earth-That-Was were certainly worth the effort and deserved more than a cursory examination on his part, but he remembered O’Keefe’s testimony – these suspicions didn’t come out of nowhere. Adeoye wondered if it had been Lofton who had scared this man. That would put a neat bow on the case.

“Mr O’Keefe mentioned that you thought someone was after it?”

“Who?”

“The guard.”

“Ah,” Dehlavi said, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his face down a little. It only served to spread the sooty sweat around more evenly. “Yes. I only got the vase recently. It was my ex’s, you see, and I got it in the divorce. I’ve had a couple of offers for it since, but there was this one guy on the ship who was really persistent. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. But it just means a lot to me, you see? Means that I survived.”

Adeoye nodded, even if he thought the man was a bit melodramatic. He still got the prospective buyers name off of Dehlavi. To his disappointment, it wasn’t Lofton. It was Bolton.



The woman across from Adeoye had a gaze. It wasn’t quite a stare – it wasn’t quite intense enough to be one. It was just a gaze. He’d been observing her for the last couple of minutes, ever since he’d sat down opposite her. The other suspect had talked easily, and behind his stony exterior he’d hid a lot of anger and pride. She’d be different, he thought.

She just gazed at him, waiting with the patience of a shark cruising through the sea for her next meal. She would drag this out forever if he let her.

“State your name, for the record,” he finally began.

“Antonia Mae Jenkins,” she answered, voice perfectly casual, as if they were sitting in a café on main street over a couple of tea cakes. He’d bet a month’s pay that this wasn’t her first rodeo in the interrogation chair.

“You know why you’re here, I assume?”

She didn’t nod. She merely inclined her head. “Yes.”

“You’re handling this like a professional. Have you been interrogated before?”

Jenkins raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never been convicted of anything,” she replied. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

It wasn’t, but he got his answer, alright. It would be tough, getting anything useful out of her. She’d either stay mum or tell a lovely story that might be the God’s honest truth or a complete lie, and there’d be no way to tell the difference. Adeoye leaned back and crossed his arms while she mirrored the action a moment later, still giving him that gaze.

“What can you tell me about the fire?” he asked.

Jenkins shrugged. “Shouldn’t you ask the person who lit it? That’s what this is about, isn’t it? It wasn’t just an accident. It was arson.”

“I am asking you, Miss Jenkins.”

“I didn’t do it,” she insisted. She uncrossed her arms, then crossed them again. It wasn’t a frantic gesture, quite the opposite, but he wondered if it was a hint at something going on behind those cool, proud eyes.

“What can you tell me about Coltrane?”

At that, she let out a small laugh. “Wasn’t him. He was sick for half the voyage and wouldn’t admit to it. Doesn’t do well on a boat.”

“Know him well, do you?”

She sighed. “I ran into him a couple of times, noticed he was sick a lot. That’s all. Look, if you’ve got anything substantial, get on with it. Otherwise, I’d like to talk to a legal counsel. You’re obliged to provide one if asked, ain’t you?”

“And waste both our time while waiting on them, you sure you want that?”

Her eyes dared him to try her, and he knew he wouldn’t. She didn’t know he was working to a deadline, but she could probably guess. People never liked a mess and always wanted it to go away as fast as humanly possible. She knew he didn’t want to make waves, and putting pressure on her would do just that. She’d make damn sure of that.

“You were near the passenger quarters,” he pointed out. “O’Keefe was quite lucky you were.”

“It’s my job, serving people,” she pointed out. “I was around the passenger quarters a lot, delivering champagne and dessert, or even whole meals if people wanted to stay on their own.”

“But you shouldn’t have been there then – there was the party on the Lido Deck. There were supposed to be fireworks later. A ball. A band playing waltz after waltz. It was all hands on deck. Literally.”

She gazed at him again. “Not all hands,” she said.

“Explain, then.”



The *Majestic Queen* was enormous – Jayne and Mal didn’t realize just how big she was. Jayne stayed below the waterline for the most part, and when not, he was busy suffering from what he insisted wasn’t seasickness, despite all evidence to the contrary. As for Mal, he stayed in his cabin and walked the upper decks pretending to be a simple *flâneur*⁶ while looking for the mark – so far, without luck. At least he managed to keep out of trouble. It was Zoë who saw all of her – the good, the bad and the ridiculously luxurious. The gilded balustrades and the rusty railings, the velvet drapes and the cheap synthetic curtains.

“How’s Jayne holding up?” Mal asked with a spot of mirth when she brought him his dinner. One of the perks of this particular job was that he shared his five-spice marinated grilled chicken with her – the trip was all-inclusive and already paid for, so there was no reason not to live it up a little and order extra-large portions. A perk of the job. Wash would die with jealousy when she told him about it later – he appreciated good food even more than she did.

“Probably glad he doesn’t have to watch us eat, but otherwise, he’s doing his job so far. Both of them,” she told him while chewing on a delicious drumstick.

“He come up with anything good?”

“Heard about the fireworks? Well, if all else fails, he’s figured out where they stashed them. That’d make a good diversion.”

Mal laughed. “That’s very like him. But he’s got a point. Explosives are always a good diversion. Pretty ones should be even more so. And you?”

⁶ *flâneur*: rich person who takes idle walks

Zoë sighed. “Still no luck. I think I’ve been through three decks worth of cabins already, but no Basan and no vase.”

“Keep at it, and I’ll try to figure something out on my end.”

And with that, their informal briefing was done and Zoë went back to the mind-numbing work of trying to find a specific ant in a metallic ant hill. The cruise was supposed to last a fortnight, and they were three days into it. Seven to a supposedly very picturesque isle called Avalon with an important and equally quaint festival on the day they arrived, seven back, and along the way all the comfort and diversions one could wish for, from gambling to dancing. They’d find Basan eventually. It wasn’t like he could go anywhere. And so Zoë spent another five very long days wheeling trays back and forth and picking up a meager handful of tips that she shared with her fellow servers and servants.

“Are they always this stingy?” she asked Marguerite one day when they were all relaxing in the mess during their downtime, playing a hand of cards. Zoë couldn’t care less about the tips, but the others had to make a living doing this.

“Yeah,” Marguerite scoffed. “Nobody as tight with their purse as these Core folks. Might as well be invisible.”

“Least the pay’s good otherwise,” Sean added. “Plus, room and board are free, and you get to go places. And you don’t have to go off planet for it and the food’s good.”

Marguerite nodded in agreement and stared at her hand, worrying at her lip already. She was bluffing, Zoë concluded. Marcus was staring at her face a mite too intently. It was a miracle Marguerite hadn’t picked up on his crush yet.

“Can’t complain about the food,” she agreed. They got to eat the leftovers, which were miles above the protein bars she usually subsisted on. Still, she wouldn’t exchange the Black for anything. Not even five-spice grilled chicken.

“Doesn’t sound like you’ll be staying on,” Sean said. “The sea not to your liking?”

Zoë shrugged. “It’s alright, for a job. But not something I can see myself doing for long. Don’t think I’m cut out for serving rich folk.” It was the truth, alright. The closer you stayed to that, the easier the act was. That was what River had told her before leaving. She might go by Antonia here, she didn’t have a husband and she wasn’t a vet of a war people did their very best to forget, but otherwise, she was Zoë. And Zoë laid down her cards, causing the other three to groan.

“With that poker face?” Marguerite said once she’d watched Zoë pocket her win – a paltry sum, if they pulled this heist off, but it would look suspicious if she was too magnanimous with her credits. “I bet you could keep that face straight even with the

worst of the passengers. The number of times I've been groped by a guy who had more money than sense..."

"I would. And then I'd knee him in the balls. Don't think that would go over too well."

Sean, Marcus, and Marguerite laughed. "Would love to see it, though," Marguerite said, almost dreamily.

"Same," Marcus agreed.

But they wouldn't. No passenger tried to get handsy with Zoë. She kept checking in with Jayne, met Mal at least once a day, to exchange information, and she kept her eyes open. With every passing day, she sunk deeper into her role in an uncomfortable way. It was as if she was forgetting a part of herself, and she didn't like that. When they reached the flower festival on Avalon, she was ready for the trip to be over. One more week, she told herself, and kept at it.

And her patience was rewarded. The day after they left the island, she was wheeling leftovers back to the kitchen and was about to enter the service elevators on the Sunshine Deck when she saw a man leave his cabin. She almost froze at the sight before lowering her head and moving on, because finally, there was their man. Cabin F76.



It started as just another day, really, Antonia told the lieutenant as she watched him tap his fingers on the table between them, despite all the work. That's what they don't see up top – just how much work goes into a big shindig. You have to organize the canapés, the decorations, everything has to be fresh, every tablecloth has to be just so, the flower arrangements all identical. And while all that's going on, it's still business as usual.

"D102 again?" Marguerite asked when she saw Toni load up her tray with a familiar arrangement of food and wine.

Toni nodded.

"That man's a peculiar goose, ain't he?"

"Wouldn't know," Toni replied. She didn't like to speculate about the passengers. If all this one wanted to do was hang out in his cabin and stare out of the window, that was his business. He was predictable, and that alone was endearing him to her. This job brought too many surprises with it as it was.

Well, you know. Some passenger suddenly getting into a screaming match with his wife while you're just trying to do your job, something going missing and the staff getting the blame, that sort of thing. And yeah, I said D102. Is that relevant?

Toni delivered the lunch to D102, as she did every day, and then she took away the leftovers, not that there were many. D102 had a good appetite, despite the large portions and slim figure. *I didn't see anything suspicious. His name? Let me think... Lafferton? No, I think it was Lofton. Tall white fellow, brown hair, prominent nose. About my age. No tips.* It was a day like any other, only it was the last of the voyage. When she got back to the servants' mess, everyone was already busy, and the moment she dropped the tray off at the kitchens, she got handed an armful of garlands and sent to the Lido Deck. She spent the rest of the afternoon with the garlands – she was too new to be entrusted with ikebana or cutlery. Those were a lot more complicated than they looked at first glance, and not to be handled by green girls like her.

Then, the party started. Toni was already dead tired on her feet by the time she started to patrol the periphery of the ballroom with a tray of lobster canapés. She still thought it was weird, how she was basically invisible to the guests like this. Like a walking table or a serving droid. But those were too expensive and didn't fit the aesthetic the cruise liner was going for, so here she was. She was on her third tray when she stumbled and almost scattered them across the burgundy carpet.

I hadn't slept well that night, that might have been it. Plus, it was the first day of my period. It just wasn't my day.

"I feel like I'm about to fall over," she hissed at Sean when she brought back the empty tray.

Her colleague shot her a glance. "You look a mite pale too. Want a couple of minutes?"

She took the chance, gladly, and nodded. "I'll give you my winnings from last night," she promised him before walking out of the ballroom. The moment the door fell shut behind her, she felt a million times lighter already. Maybe it was all the noise. There were so many people chattering and dancing, it sounded like she imagined a giant flock of seagulls did, if you put your head right in the middle of it.

No, I didn't see D102. But there were a lot of people there. Could have easily missed him in the crowd. It wasn't like I was looking.

All Toni really wanted was to lie down for a couple of minutes. She went downstairs to tell her supervisor, but Mrs Wang had other ideas.

"We need someone to deliver a bottle of champagne," the harried woman said. "The order is over there. You can have a few minutes to yourself after that, but I don't have any hands to spare, so do your job."

No. I don't know who ordered it. You should ask Mrs Wang.

Toni sighed and did. She checked the terminal for the open orders and found a lone one – a bottle of champagne to room F42. Just what she needed. But she did as she was told, got a tray, as if that was needed for a single bottle, and put the damned thing on ice. She was halfway up the empty decks when the cramps really hit her.

I went to the nearest bathroom for some relief, and I have to admit, I didn't exactly hurry. It was the last day, I was feeling shitty, and whoever wanted a bottle of champagne just then could wait a little longer. The bottle was on ice. Wasn't like it'd get warm. If I hadn't been there, they would've waited even longer.

When Toni finally arrived at the starboard side of the Sunshine Deck, she was greeted with a sight that made her forget all about the champagne. There was a cabin door open in the distance, with flames licking at the carpet. Then she noticed the large guy passed out on the floor a couple of feet ahead of her. He was wearing a security guard uniform. She recognized him – Marcus – the guy who had a crush on Marguerite. And so she abandoned the bubbly and ran to grab the guy's leg and dragged him away from the budding conflagration.

I think at some point, the fire alarm went off. But I was coughing bad by then. It took a while for Marcus to come 'round, I think the noise helped some. If he hadn't, I don't know if he'd've made it. It was bad. Or at least it looked bad. Not an expert on fires. I think the cruise line might have skimped on the fire suppression system. It took ages for the automatic sprinkler system to kick in, and from what I hear, half the fires had to be put out by hand. If you ask me, that was the real crime. People could have died. Marcus could have died.



“What’s he doing here?” Mal asked when he sauntered up to them, looking mighty surreal acting like himself in his dandy coat. Zoë shrugged, while Jayne kicked Marcus in the side, as if he was trying to make a point. He didn’t move. He hadn’t since Jayne had hit him in the head with his broomstick. Poor guy, she thought. Wrong place, wrong time, and he’d get in trouble for it in the end. At least Jayne hadn’t resorted to using the improvised, fireworks-based explosives he carried, mighty proud of his own deviousness. There’d been no need for that – Marcus hadn’t even had a chance to turn and see them.

“Dunno,” Jayne said. “But we should get on with it, don’t you think? ’Fore he wakes up.”

“Might be there’s more coming too,” Zoë agreed. It worried her. Marcus had no reason to be there. Nobody did. The entirety of the lower decks was empty. Everyone was either upstairs partying or working their ass off downstairs. It was a mere hour or so until the

grand finale, fireworks included. Mal had timed things well. In a couple of minutes at best, Wash and Kaylee should be ready with the shuttle, waiting for their signal to come pick them up – either from one of the decks or a lifeboat. Maybe they were already there, waiting in the darkness. She indulged herself for a brief moment and imagined Wash, brow furrowed in concentration as he managed to make the shuttle hover quietly in the darkness. He always got that intense look of concentration on a job that was so unlike him, yet also so very like him at the same time.

“Then let’s get to it,” Mal decided, and led the way. Even if he’d had a more comfortable time of it than both she and Jayne, Zoë knew he was just as eager to get back home, to his own ship. When they arrived at Basan’s cabin, he took the far side of the door, Zoë the other one, and Jayne, well, he kicked the door in. There wasn’t really any time or reason for finesse if there was security about that might find them any second. Time was of the essence. Plus, they’d be gone in an hour. It took three kicks for the polished wood and metal to give way to reveal a cabin much like all the others on the ship.

“Ruttin’ hell, Mal, you’ve been living like this all week?”

Mal raised an eyebrow and strode into the room. “It’s not as fun as it looks.”

“Keep tellin’ yourself that,” Jayne mumbled.

They were all ready to search the room like a well-oiled thieving machine, but Mal already had right before they boarded. There was no need.

“Found it,” he said when he pushed aside the curtain to the bedding area. There, on the bedside table, stood the vase in all its porcelain glory. It looked kind of small, Zoë thought. She’d been expecting something a bit more... grand.

“All this for that?” Jayne asked.

“Well, there’s no accounting for taste,” Mal quipped. “But there is for credits.” He grabbed the vase.

They were about to leave the cabin and ship behind with their bounty when a large shadow appeared in the ruined doorway, blocking their only exit.

“*Qīng wā cāo de liú máng?*!” Mal cursed. Zoë agreed wholeheartedly. Why couldn’t one lousy job go off without a hitch? Just one?

“Now, there’s no need for crudeness,” a seedy voice told them. The large shadow moved aside a little, and the man belonging to it filled the gap. He was as reedy as he sounded, with thinning long hair and sallow cheeks. In his right hand, he carried a cane with an

⁷ *qīng wā cāo de liú máng*: frog-humping hooligan

ornate silver handle. He practically stank of money. “If you would be so kind and hand over the vase. I doubt you have any idea just what you’re lugging around like a milk jug from some backwater moon.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Mal asked while Zoë kept her eyes on the large shadow – hired muscle, by the looks, and quality one at that. The man stood almost as tall as the door frame and seemed to carry twice Jayne’s muscle.

The reedy man laughed. “I don’t think that matters. You’ve got something I want, and you’re going to give it to me, or else Jesse here will make things rather unpleasant.”

“See, the thing is, I’m being paid to do a job, and I’m gonna do it. So I don’t care what you or Jesse or the fucking captain of this ship says. This overpriced piss pot is getting where it’s supposed to be,” Mal told him.

“Suit yourself,” the reedy man replied, stepping back and leaving Jesse to take center stage. Zoë watched as the giant moved, stepping into the lamp light. Somehow, that made him look even more frightening, but there was no backing down. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jayne take the other flank while Mal put down the vase next to the wall dividing most of the living area from the bedroom – probably a good move. This’d get ugly. None of them had been able to bring weapons, so their only chance at winning was numerical superiority, as the lieutenants back during her army days used to say. Bloody business, the grunts used to call it.

“Let’s see what you got,” Mal goaded, lifting his fists as if he stood a chance.

Zoë had different ideas. She simply grabbed the cabin’s hat stand and in one fluent motion tried to whack the giant in the head with the base – with little luck. Gorrarn Jesse was faster than he looked, and now she had the displeasure of his undivided attention. He lifted his fist and began swinging. Frantically, Zoë looked for enough room to retreat, but the cabin was just. Too. Small.

“Not so fast,” Mal grunted, kicking Jesse in the knee. He buckled a little, enough to make his fist miss Zoë by a hair’s breadth. She used the chance to fall to her knees and roll sideways, deeper into the cabin. Mal followed her, grabbing the vase like a shield, and so did Jayne. They moved through the curtain and into the bedroom. Zoë noticed Jayne fumbling with something while they did, and a feeling of diffuse dread began to form in her belly, but the vast majority of her attention was still focused on Jesse. The goon lumbered after them, not the least bit deterred by their pitiful attempts at defense.

Then everything happened all at once: Zoë and Jayne moved to flank Jesse again while Mal lured him into the middle of the room, waving the vase around as if he was dealing

with a bull. Zoë was about to go for the other knee when suddenly, Jayne screamed “Down!” and everything exploded.

For a handful of terrifying seconds, Zoë didn’t see anything beyond the multi-colored flares shooting back and forth, but she heard cursing, grunting and glass shattering. The acrid smoke left behind in the wake of Jayne’s improvised fireworks display was burning in her lungs as she tried to get her bearings.

By some miracle, nobody got hurt. When the smoke had cleared enough, Zoë could see Mal cowering by the ruined window front that had once allowed for an excellent view of the ocean, vase miraculously still in one piece and in his hands, while Jayne had ended up pressed against the inward wall within arm’s reach of her, shaking his head as if he’d hit it. Even Jesse, the largest target, was only rubbing at his eyes and cast his free hand about, trying to find them or the door or the vase. They were all still intact.

The same could not be said about the room. The luxurious carpet in the middle of the room had caught fire, which was in the process of spreading to the bed and the walls. The chandelier was dangling by a precarious thread, the wiring sparking. Zoë looked back at Mal the same moment he looked back at them, coming to the same realization at the very same time: he was trapped. There was no way he could get across the room, his only possible escape was the sea at night.

“Well I’ll be damned...” Zoë heard him mutter. For a split second, she was back in the trenches with him, suffering Alliance fire, completely sure that this was it, that it was over.

“Fuck this.” It was the first thing she had heard Jessie say, and it would be the last. The moment he could finally see what was going on, he fled from the cabin, against his master’s protests. Smart move, really. But all that was happening at the edge of Zoë’s consciousness. She was focused on Mal, on trying to find a way to get him across, in vain. The best they could hope for was the staff barging in with fire extinguishers before handing them over to the feds in one neatly tied package. Or he would have to jump – not that drowning was much better than burning to death...

“Anyone need a ride?” a cheery and all-too-familiar voice asked, booming through the air over speaker. Wash. “That was quite the signal.”

A moment later, the shuttle hovered into view next to the balcony, with Kaylee hanging out of the door, holding a sturdy cable. Zoë looked at them, then back at Mal, and did the math.

“Go!” she shouted to Mal. There was no way they would be able to get to the shuttle in time for a timely getaway, but it was Mal’s only chance. He had to take it. “Go!” she repeated while Jayne cursed beside her. By now, the rest of the ship must be on high alert.

The last thing she saw of Mal before he vanished in the darkness and smoke was a grim nod as he clutched the vase and gripped the dangling cable like the hero from a caper flick. When he disappeared, she breathed a sigh of relief, before turning her mind to her own predicament.



The moment the door opened, two privates shoved their way past the occupant of the room. It was quite a bit below the man's usual standards, Adeoye reckoned. Those who hadn't been given permission to leave for the city and more comfortable accommodations were being housed in what used to serve as navy barracks during the war. There was little beside a standard military cot and a chair and table.

"You can't do this," the lanky man argued, clutching the handle of his cane in a way that made his knuckles seem even more skeletal.

"Standard procedure," Adeoye assured him.

Bolton scoffed. He'd made his fortune in fuel price speculation just when the war started. Adeoye had read up on him. He hadn't expected someone of Bolton's caliber to fall for it, but it was what you said in these types of situations. "I'm sure it is," Bolton drawled. "Dehlavi, I take it?"

"What makes you think it's about him and not Lofton?"

"Who?"

Adeoye sighed and leveled his gaze. "Dehlavi did mention you were interested in an object of his that has gone missing in the fire," he admitted.

"Well, I don't have the bloody vase, you can search for it all you want."

And Adeoye's men did, but they found nothing. Bolton stood by the entire time, a dark look on his face, as if he wished to set someone on fire with it. When they left and he shut the door behind himself, Adeoye heard his mumbled cursing, but couldn't make out the words. Whatever they were, Adeoye could sympathize with the sentiment: his main suspect might be the only casualty of the fire and his last lead had just come up short.



"You did the best you could, Lieutenant," Private Park said as he stood behind Adeoye in the command center and watched the detainees slowly filter out of the detention facility from behind bullet-proof glass. It felt masochistic to stand there and watch his

failure unfold before his eyes, but Adeoye wanted to remember this day – so as not to repeat it.

His eyes fell on Jenkins as she picked up her bag as if she'd just cleared customs on Osiris. A couple of minutes after her, Coltrane picked up his sea sack, casting about his eyes as if he was worried someone might snatch it from him – or as if he was worried about being followed. Adeoye still didn't know what to make of them. His instinct told him that there was something fishy about them, but he had no proof. All he had was a passenger who was missing his prize Earth-That-Was artifact, a single missing passenger nobody could tell him anything about, and a whole lot of property damage that might explain both. Maybe Lofton and the vase were entertaining the fish by now, victims of some unfortunate quarrel or accident.

“Good, I see you're wrapping up,” the admiral said. Adeoye winced internally, but thanks to his training he was able to keep his face straight. Judging by the admiral's tone of voice, the wife was off to the niece's wedding. “Have you been able to ascertain whether it was a robbery or not?”

Adeoye sighed and shook his head. “If it was a robbery, it was masterfully done. All the evidence got destroyed.” Across the hall, a giant of a man left, and Adeoye couldn't help but wonder who brought hired muscle on a pleasure cruise. Then he shoved the thought to the back of his mind – no longer his problem, he told himself.

“Never mind. It's Mr. Dehlavi's own problem that he failed to insure his vase accordingly. It's the security aspect that worries me.”

Naturally. Between the fire and the lagging response time, not to mention the faulty fire suppression system, people could have died. There had been twenty-two people who had needed to be hospitalized due to smoke inhalation – staff, exclusively. Things could have easily gotten out of hand, and an admiral's wife trampled in the ensuing chaos.

“We've secured all the evidence and collected testimonies. Two staff members admitted that the disarmed smoke sensors in the cabins were intentional – apparently there had been trouble with birthday cakes and heavy smokers, so management decided to make things easier and rely on the ones in the corridors exclusively,” he told the admiral. Which was all well and good, unless the fire decided to spread upwards and lengthwise, not inward. If the guests hadn't been gathered upstairs at the time...

“And the expired fire suppression fluid?”

“Cost cutting measure.”

For a moment, Adeoye and the admiral shared a silent moment of exasperation, which was about as much camaraderie as Adeoye was capable of when it came to his superiors.

“The attorney general will be very happy, at least. He has all the makings of a successful politician, and this case might prove an excellent starting point for his campaign,” the admiral concluded.

The cruise line would be less happy. Along with the damage claims from the guests, the trial might ruin it. And a lot of the people walking past Adeoye would need to find new jobs, if the fire hadn't already put them off their current ones. Still... he doubted he'd see Coltrane or Jenkins again, and if he did, those wouldn't be their names. He had a hunch. If they ever crossed his path again, he'd get them. That, he promised himself.



Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck... the word turned in Jayne's mind like Serenity's drive as he watched the fire lapping at the darkness. He was well and truly fucked and there was nothing nobody could do about it. He could already see the feds closing in on him and he wished for nothing more than a gun. Vera, preferably, but any old rusty iron would do. He'd go down fighting, that's for sure.

“*Zhēn dǎo méi*⁸,” he muttered under his breath. Where was that gorram broomstick that he'd brought?

Then someone yanked at him, sharply, and he found himself face to face with Zoë Washburne's fiery eyes. Her hand was curled into his shirt and Jayne would never admit it, but she looked a mite scary just then, with fire reflecting off her eyes and grim determination on her face.

“You listen to me, Jayne Cobb, you're going to do exactly what I tell you, and we're going to get through this, *dǒng ma*⁹?”

He stared at her for a moment, wondering what was going through her head that hadn't occurred to him, but in the end he simply nodded.

“You're going to get out there, back to your cabin, and if anyone sees you, you were just looking for a lonesome place to be sick, because you've been sick the entire time, got it? Just pretend like you don't know nothing; you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I'm not—”

“You've been puking on and off all fortnight, you're not fooling anyone. So just own up to it, play it up, and pretend we barely know each other. Now leave!”

⁸ *zhēn dǎo méi*: that's bad luck

⁹ *dǒng ma*: understood?

Jayne did as he was told because to be frank, he didn't know what else to do. He ran past the unconscious security type, down the stairs and to his cabin, gathering his things. By the time he emerged, the entire ship was abuzz and people were talking about a possible evacuation and lifeboats. Jayne just listened and clutched his pack tighter, wondering how Zoë was doing and how long it would take for the feds to come lock him up. If only he had a gorram gun...



“Thank you again, Toni,” Marcus said, gripping her hand in his. Zoë wished she could show how awkward she was really feeling. After all, it had been her fault – among others’ – that she’d had to save his life. “If there’s anything I can help with, just let me know.”

“No need,” she assured him. “I got friends with friends who can take me off-planet. New moon, new chances, as they say.”

She waved him off and waited until he’d walked out of sight, then sighed deeply. It was almost over. Soon, she could curl up in bed with Wash or laugh with the others about another job gone wrong. She wondered if the vase had survived – it better have.

Of course, first, she took the long way home, across the market, where she browsed the wares and bought a tiny dinosaur figurine that Wash might like, along with some oranges to share later. All the while, she kept an eye out for anybody following her, but there was no one to be seen. If she was being tailed, the lieutenant’s people were doing a bang-up job.

The sun was already setting when Serenity’s familiar hull came into view, its ramp up and berth deserted, just another ship waiting for this or that before take-off. One shuttle was missing, but that one was Inara’s, so she didn’t worry. Everything was as it should be when she hit the buzzer.

“Zoë!” Kaylee cried before the ramp was fully down. Seconds later, she launched herself into Zoë’s arms. “You’re alright. I was so worried when we had to leave you, but Jayne said you sorted everything out.”

“I don’t know,” she answered, muffled by Kaylee’s hair. Behind her, she could see Simon and River, looking relieved but not stepping out of the hold, and beyond that, Wash, a grin all over his face. She couldn’t help but smile back. “It was way too easy. All I did was stick to the story.”

“Don’t matter,” Kaylee insisted. “Captain’s going to be happy to see you too, once he gets back from delivering the goods. Didn’t want to hang on to them for too long, considering. Was a mighty shiny vase, though. Real pretty shade of blue.”

“The dragon was nice,” River agreed once Zoë and Kaylee were back inside. “It was fighting a tortoise.”

Zoë did not remember a tortoise. Behind River, Simon shrugged, because evidently neither did he. But River was prone to seeing things that weren't there, or maybe it was one of those things that was there, only the rest of them were too blind to see it.

“And Jayne?”

“Told us all about how he got rid of a giant merc with the power of his ingenuity,” Wash explained while giving her a quick peck on the cheek. “Of course, Mal told us all about how he almost blew y'all up with fireworks, after being basically useless for most of the job.”

“Wasn't his fault he got seasick,” Zoë told him. “He was there when it counted.”

“Yeah, but he'll never hear the end of it,” Wash promised. “He makes it too much fun, insisting it was just the weird food, or whatever. Apropos: do I smell oranges?”

Zoë nodded and took them out of the bag, handing them to the others. River snatched Kaylee's out of her hands and started juggling while Kaylee tried to get it back. Simon and Wash watched the two girls while Zoë watched them. There was laughter and happiness and a simplicity of life that she'd missed on the ship. It was good to be home, she thought. Back with her crew. And enough credits to live without a worry for a month or two.

Fin